

THE GREATNESS OF THE RISHI TRADITION OF INDIA

॥ इदं नमः ऋषिभ्यः पूर्वजेभ्यः पूर्वैभ्यः पथिकृद्भ्यः ॥

॥ *idaṁ namaḥ ṛṣibhyaḥ pūrvajebhyaḥ pūrvēbhyaḥ pathikṛdbhyaḥ* ॥ (Rigveda, 10.14.15)
“We offer our obeisance to the Rishis, born of old, the ancients, the path-makers.”

Introduction

India, indeed, is the land of the Rishis. Therefore, the culture of India is often called as the culture of the Rishis. The tradition of the Rishis in India seems to be perennially flowing, like a stream, to enrich the mind and imagination of her common people. So, in India, the Rishis are revered as supreme personalities. Living a true life was to be learnt from the Rishis.

A Rishi is the one through whom the secret words of the *Vedas* are revealed,¹ the one who has the inner sight to see the *Mantra*. Therefore, the Rishis are known as the seers (*ṛṣirdarśanāt*) of the *Mantra* - *ṛṣayaḥ mantradraṣṭāraḥ*.² Sri Aurobindo says that a Rishi “sees or discovers an inner truth and puts it into self-effective language - the *Mantra*.”³ He further elucidates that a Rishi is the seer. He has seen the *Mantras* (*mantradraṣṭā*). According to Sri Aurobindo, “The Rishi was not the individual composer of the hymns but the seer (*draṣṭā*) of an eternal truth and an impersonal knowledge.”⁴ He does not merely see, he also hears. He possesses a supernatural faculty of hearing. To his inner audience “the divine word came vibrating out of the Infinite”. So he is called *Kavi satyashruta*, the hearer of Truth. He is the possessor of great spiritual and occult knowledge, the complete inner knowledge. The Rishis “were seers as well as sages, they were men of vision who saw things in their meditation in images, often symbolic images, which might precede an experience and put it in a concrete form.” So it was possible for the Rishis “to see at once the inner experience and in image its symbolic happenings.”⁵ In the words of Yaskacharya, “the *Mantra* came to the Rishis who were doing *tapas*, therefore they became Rishis, in that lies the Rishihood of the Rishis.” *tadenān tapasyamānān brahama svayamabhyānārṣat | tadṛṣayo'bhavan | tadṛṣiṇām ṛṣitvam* |⁶ Elsewhere he observes that the purport of the *Mantras* “has to be reached by *tapas* alone”,⁷ *tasyāstapasā*

¹ *tathaivam vedānṛṣayastapasā pratipedire* (Mahabharata, Shantiparva 155.2)

² See Nirukta of Yaskacharya Naigamakanda, 2.11

³ The Future Poetry, SABCL, Vol. 9, P. 517

⁴ The Secret of the Veda, SABCL, Vol. 10, P. 8

⁵ The Hymns to the Mystic Fire, Vol. 11, P. 12

⁶ Nirukta of Yaska 2.11

⁷ Nirukta of Yaska 13.13

pāramīpsitavyam. Shaunaka supports Yaskacharya's viewpoint when he says in his *Bṛhaddevata*, "The *Mantra* is not perceptible to one who is not a Rishi"⁸ na *pratyakṣamanṛṣhiṇāmasti mantram*. He further declares, "He knows the gods who knows the *Riks*. The *Mantras* to be approached through Yoga with self-control and skill, understanding, general knowledge and above all *tapasya*."⁹

Rishis are the possessors of great spiritual and occult knowledge, the complete inner knowledge. They are men of vision who during their meditation see images and put these in a concrete form. So it is possible for the Rishis to experience at the same time the inner Truth as well as see in image its symbolic happenings.

The Rishis, the seers of the *Mantra* devoted to a life of Spirit, discover a certain line of development beyond the range of sensory perception by means of their strength of self-discipline and achieve a many-sided inner progress.

The word 'Rishi' comes from the root 'Rish' which in Sanskrit means, 'to go', 'to move' and 'to flow'. Thus, a Rishi is the 'one who flows or moves or is in tune with the rhythmic flow or movement of the universe'. He is one with the movement. He vibrates with the vibration of the movement. He knows the truth of the whole of the movement.

A Rishi is also known as *kavi*, the poet; *satyadraṣṭā*, the seer of the truth; *satyaśrotā*, the hearer of the truth; *krāntadarśī*, of transcendental vision; *mantradraṣṭā*, the seer of the *Mantra*; *krāntadarśī*, of transcendental vision; *mantradraṣṭā*, the seer of the *Mantra*.

In India, Rishis have always been given the highest reverence. Their words always held an authority greater than those of kings and other leaders of the society.

Throughout the ages India has thrown up a long line of seers and sages of various orders and there is hardly any period in her history where there have not been at least a few seers and sages.

In the words of Sri Aurobindo: "Ours is the eternal land, the eternal people, the eternal religion, whose strength, greatness, holiness may be overclouded but never, even for a moment, utterly cease. The hero, the Rishi, the saint, are the natural fruits of our Indian soil; and there has been no age in which they have not been born... The Rishi is different from the

⁸ Bṛhaddevata of Shaunaka 8.129

⁹ Bṛhaddevata of Shaunaka 8.130 *yogena dākṣyeṇa damena buddhyā bāhuśrutya tapasā niyogaiḥ* |

upāsyāstāḥ kṛtsnaśo devatāyā ṛco ha yo veda sa veda devān |

*saint. His life may not have been distinguished by superior holiness nor his character by an ideal beauty. He is not great by what he was himself but by what he has expressed. A great and vivifying message had to be given to a nation or to humanity; and God has chosen this mouth on which to shape the words of the message. A momentous vision had to be revealed; and it is his eyes which the Almighty first unseals. The message which he has received, the vision which has been vouchsafed to him, he declares to the world with all the strength that is in him, and in one supreme moment of inspiration expresses it in words which have merely to be uttered to stir men's inmost natures, clarify their minds, seize their hearts and impel them to things which would have been impossible to them in their ordinary moments. Those words are the mantra which he was born to reveal and of that mantra he is the seer."*¹⁰

In India, the Rishi was always, recognized, as it is even now, as the real teacher, the guru. He is all powerful to intervene between the seeker and the highest object of seeking. He knows right word of instruction and right mantra of initiation. He himself is the living example of the ideal that he places before the seeker. His power flows directly from within to the inmost being of the seeker.

The Rishis devoted maximum time of their life to self-study, composition of various literary works, imparting knowledge to the disciples, propagating knowledge to the masses and doing tapas for the good of the world. The Rishi is the friend of all and does good to all. His message is oneness in which he lives all the times and he knows nothing of division. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "The seer, the freed & illuminated soul hates none, condemns nothing but loves all and helps all; he is sarvabhutahite ratah, his occupation & delight are to do good to all creatures. He is the Self seeing the Self in all, loving the Self in all, enjoying the Self in all, helping the Self in all. That is the ethics & morality of the Vedanta."¹¹

Rishis of the Veda

The Rishis of the Veda were great mystics whose first concern was spiritual - not the spiritual as divorced from the temporal and the secular, but as both the high point and sustaining base of all that is in the universe.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Rishis, the poet-seers of the Veda, were men "...with a great spiritual and occult knowledge not shared by ordinary human beings, men who handed down this knowledge and their powers by a secret initiation to their descendant and chosen disciples."¹²

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, vol.1, pg. 637)

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, CWSA vol.17, pg 411

¹² Sri Aurobindo, CWSA vol.16, pp 6-7

The contributions of the Rishis can be experienced/ observed through the verses of the four Vedas, of which the Rig Veda is considered the oldest. The Rigveda has ten *mandalas* or sections. Out of the ten sections, the first and the last were the contributions of various Rishis. From 2nd to the 9th each section is the contribution of the Rishis of a particular family. In Rigveda the 2nd Mandala is credited to the family of Bhrigu; the 3rd Mandala is to the family of Vishvamitra; the fourth to the family of Gautama and the fifth to the family of Atri; while the sixth Mandala is by the family of Bharadvaja the seventh is accredited to the family of Vasishtha; the seers of the eighth Mandala belong to the family of Kanva and the ninth Mandala to the family of Angirasas.

It must not be understood that all those who lived in the Vedic age were Rishis, or all the Rishis and common people of that time had attained an all round prosperity – spiritual and material. Rather it has to be understood thus: The Rishis, the seers of the *Mantra*, devoted to a life of Spirit, discovered a certain line of development beyond the range of sensory perception by means of their strength of self-discipline and achieved a many-sided inner progress. Whatever they achieved by their *tapasya* they then cast into a veiled language which they called '*Mantra*'.

Types of Rishis

These Rishis of Vedic period were of two types: those who perceived the Mantras directly by the power of their tapas and the others who were incapable of direct perception but had an intense aspiration to go deep into the Mantras perceived by the superior Rishis. The first kind of Rishis were called *sākṣātkṛtadharmā* and the second type of Rishis were called *asākṣātkṛtadharmā*.¹³ Later the sense of the term Rishi got expanded and we come across several types of Rishis mentioned in our Shastras: *śrutarṣi*, *kāṇḍarṣi*, *taparṣi*, *satyarṣi*, *devarṣi*, *maharṣi*, *paramarṣi*, *brahmarṣi*, *rājarṣi*, *janarṣi* etc.¹⁴ The role of the Rishis as seers is prominent in the Vedic literature, while their role as teachers is emphasized in the epics and Puranas. In the epics we find mention about various categories of these Rishis: the Rishis who were

¹³ Nirukta of Yaskacharya, 1.20

¹⁴ Those who received the Mantras from their teachers were called *śrutarṣis*. Those who were experts in different sections of the Vedas were called *kāṇḍarṣis*. Those who performed severe penances were called *taparṣis*. Those who were given to truth and were truthful learners were called *satyarṣis*. Those who were in communion with the Gods were called *devarṣis*. Those who enjoyed a great and exalted position among the Rishis because of their contributions were called *maharṣis* or *paramarṣis*. Those who realized the Brahman, lived the truth of the Brahman and ultimately became the Brahman were called *brahmarṣis*. Those who had attained the Rishihood and at the same time ruled the kingdoms as kings were known as *rājarṣis*. A common man possessing the qualities of a Rishi was called *janarṣi*. (Baudhayana Dharmasutra, 2.9.14)

householders (*grhasthāśramīs*), Rishis who had no wives and children or never thought of women (*ūrdhvaretās*), Rishis who were hermit dwellers (*āśramavāsins*), Rishis who were continuous wanderers (*yāyāvaras*), Rishis engaged in priestly duties (*purohitas*), Rishis constantly engaged in imparting sacred knowledge to the disciples (*śāstrādhyāpakas*), Rishis engaged in imparting training in warfare (*śastrādhyāpakas*), Rishis who were constantly engaged in intense tapas (*ugratapasvins*) etc.

When we look at the lives of these Rishis we find that majority of the Rishis were householders. They lived in their hermitages with their families, chanted Vedic hymns, imparted sacred knowledge to the disciples, practiced tapas, performed daily rituals and other sacrifices.

Rishikas or the Women Seers

In the Vedas as well as in the other Vedic scriptures we find mention about several women seers. These women seers or Rishikās were mostly the family members of the Rishis, either wives or daughters. In the Rigveda we find mention about twenty-one Rishikās. During the Vedic period the women were free to live the life of a *brahmacharini* or *sannyasini*. We find mention in our scriptures about Shrutavati, a daughter of Rishi Bhardwaj who remained a *brahmacharini* all her life and entered into deep study of the Vedas; Shrimati, a daughter of Shāndilya, who led a similar life; Sulabhā who was an authority on the Vedas and entered into Vedic arguments with King Janaka; and about many other women who were given entirely to the study of the Vedas.

The wives and daughters of the Rishis were not just Veda learners but many of them were seers of mantras. So, we see Lopāmudrā (Rigveda, 1:179), Romashā (Rigveda, 1:126:7), Aditi (Rigveda, 4:18:7), Nadyā (Rigveda, 3:33), Ghoshā (Rigveda, 10:39), Apālā (Rigveda, 8:91.1 to 7), Visvavārā (Rigveda, 5:28), Indrāni (Rigveda, 10: 86 and 145), Godhā (Rigveda, 10:134:6,7) and few others like Shraddhā, Maitreyi, Urvashi, Vāgambhrini and Gārgi.

We find in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (Chapter 3, section 6) Gārgi questioning to Yajnyavalkya. This shows the Rishikās were actively participating in the various conferences on *brahmavidyā*. We see Maitreyi's aspiration for attaining immortality.

The kings and princes of the Vedic age preferred to marry the daughters of the Rishis in order to bring home the most illumined persons as their spouses. At the same time we see that many princesses, deeply interested to lead spiritual life, married to the Rishis and lived in the Ashrams.

Conclusion

Since time immemorial, we see a long line of the tradition of Rishis in India. They “were creators, educators, guides of men and the life of the Indian people in ancient times was largely developed and directed by their shaping influence.”¹⁵ It is important to note that there has always been a continuity of this tradition of Rishis and there has not been any time when the Rishis have not taken birth in this land. If India had a glorious past it was because of the seers and sages and saints of this land.

Though engaged primarily in a *tapasyā* of knowledge and self-discipline, the Rishis always did good to the world. The following words of Swami Sivananda Saraswati, the founder of Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, which he wrote in the introduction to his book on the Lives of Saints of India, present the magnanimous nature of the seers, saints and sages of India:

“Saints and sages are a blessing to the world at large. They are the custodians of superior divine wisdom, spiritual powers and inexhaustible spiritual wealth... Their very existence inspires others and goads them to become like them and attain the same state of bliss achieved by them... Their glory is indescribable. Their wisdom is unfathomable. They are deep like the ocean, steady like the Himalayas, pure like the Himalayan snow, effulgent like the sun... To be in their company is the highest education. To love them is the highest happiness. To be near them is real education.”

But, instead of merely singing the glories of the past by remembering the names of the Rishis and worshipping them is not going to do any good to the humanity and its future. What is demanded of every human being is to rise above to attain to the state of Rishihood. In the words of Swami Vivekananda: He further says: *“In ancient times there were, no doubt, many Rishis and Maharshis who came face to face with Truth. But if this recalling of our ancient greatness is to be of real benefit, we too must become*

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, CWSA Volume 13, pg 525

Rishis like them. Ay, not only that, but it is my firm conviction that we shall be even greater Rishis than any that our history presents to us.”¹⁶

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¹⁶ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 3, pg 371